

[Mountain Thinker and Experimenter]

[Interview - sketch?]

George Smith

Thinker and Experimenter

[Mentone?], Alabama

Covington Hall

Editorial Department

MOUNTAIN THINKER AND EXPERIMENTER

George Smith lives on a forty-acre farm about three miles from Mentone on the public road leading to the old Nightingale postoffice, now discontinued. He is near forty, but still active and alert. He cultivates about twenty acres of his farm and, with a helper, operates a small coal mine which he owns. The coal is all sold locally, and George gets enough out of it to live somewhat better than the average. His home is off the road a piece, and reached along a by-path across a branch into his yard.

On the farm he has an experimental orchard containing a variety of nut and fruit trees. Japanese, Burbank and English walnuts, pecans, apples, plums and peaches. These he is testing to find the species best suited to Lookout Mountain conditions. He is also [experimenting?] with berries, especially the [raspberry?]. "This berry", George declared, "will yet be one of the best cash paying crops we can raise": and, as his "rasps" are large and fine-flavored, he is probably right. He says that, last season, they brought top prices in Rome, Georgia, and other nearby markets.

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"The mountain climate", he says—[and?] so do others—"peps up fruit and vegetables. They have a more lively taste than those grown elsewhere. It is to these crops, berries, fruits, nuts, melons, Irish and sweet potatoes, and to plant sets, with eggs and chickens on the side—to produce crops we farmers here must turn if we are ever to be really prosperous. We don't want cotton. There's nothing in it but slavery." Many of his neighbors are beginning to agree with him, for this Burbank of the backwoods is persistently on the job proselyting for better ways and days. 2 But George Smith was not always the studious, steady worker he is today. As a young man he moonshined, bootlegged and, even got "soused up". His reputation was below par in the community. But all that has changed since George married his cousin and bought the farm. He has given up all his evil ways. He neither makes, sells, nor drinks whiskey. If he quit because of getting religion, he has never mentioned it. It was probably family disapproval and displeasure, plus his own will-power, rather than unfavorable communal comment that led George into changing his ways; for he is a strong character. "Even in his drinkin' days his word was good", all agreed. in 1929, a mutual friend, tiring of the summer people `playin' the farmers against each other an' beatin' down prices", persuaded ten or twelve men, among them George Smith, to agree not to take less than thirty-five cents a dozen for eggs and thirty cents a pound for broilers. George Smith along stuck to the bargain. He always does. He is strong for cooperation.

The little log cabin in which he lives, and which he built himself with some aid from friends, is a model of its kind, always clean, comfortable and well-kept. The furniture is either homemade or was bought from a large mail order concern popular in Southern rural communities, or in Valley Head or Ft. Payne; but all of it is comfortable and homey. In the sitting-dining room are books, pamphlets, papers and bulletins on the tables and shelves. The family consisted of George, wife and three children, when I last visited them about a year ago. Whether more babies have arrived since, I do not know; for when we meet on the highway or at the store, we have been so busy discussing his experiments and what

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might be done to bring less hard work and more money to the mountain people, I have never thought to ask him.

His book hunger is rare on the mountain, as is his thirst for scientific agricultural knowledge. To satisfy this last, he takes the reports of the Federal Department of Agriculture, the Alabama Farm Bulletin 3 and one or two farm journals. He reads everything on the subject he can lay his hands on. Being a miner as well as a farmer, he has moved around the country quite a bit, so knows something of the world outside. In regard to his book hunger, George say: "What's the use of living if a man doesn't keep up with the times and try to know what's going on in the world?" On many subjects he is very well informed and readily and with simple English expresses his opinion. He may say "a man should keep his mouth shut" on certain matters, or use "drug" for dragged; but, otherwise, his language is good. I have never heard him swear. If he is religious, he never talks about it. His greatest interest seems to be in his agricultural experiments. He takes pride in displaying his yard, in which are holly trees, roses, sweet shrubs and many flowers, and the orchard where his experimental trees are growing and the garden where his pet raspberries are. These last he always shows, never tiring of discussing their virtues on a coming cash crop.

All about the place is well planned, well laid out, and, if George Smith has his way and succeeds in making his dreams come true, the Lookout-Mountaineers will yet be "saved from cotton".

1/5/39

S.J.